

## **The significance of liberal arts in our times**

"When a doctor heals your body, you see your body as a carrier of the life-energy through which you would possibly read a good poem, listen to a good song, see a good film, study a book of religion or philosophy. If there is nothing higher to pursue, what do you do with a perfectly medicated body? If no good film is produced, what do you do with the grand design of a cinema hall that the engineer builds?"

### **ABOUT US**

*The New Leam* is a monthly magazine on education and culture which started in 2014. It seeks to create new possibilities in the practice of pedagogy, culture and aesthetics through the publication of innovative reading material.

This booklet-written in a dialogic form-has emerged out of the urge to initiate a meaningful conversation with young learners, researchers and educationists.

### ***The New Leam***

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## Preface

We are living at a time when education is acquiring an extremely narrow and utilitarian meaning. The rationale of the market has been allowed to dictate the agenda of education. As a result, we find ourselves amidst a hierarchy of knowledge discourses: technical/instrumental knowledges (applied sciences, engineering, economics, commerce and management) vs. hermeneutic/emancipatory knowledges (liberal arts, humanities and social sciences). The internalization of this hierarchy begins right from one's school days. Barring exceptions, schools reproduce this hierarchy—science students are considered to be meritorious and superior, whereas arts and humanities are kept for those who cannot make it into science. Furthermore, the societal pressure—particularly in the era of neo-liberal economy—forces many parents to think that the child's own curiosity or aptitude or inclination is not so important; what really matters is 'success'—a 'non-risky' trajectory: opt for science, clear the entrance test for engineering/medical colleges, get a placement, and settle down. Under these circumstances, many students who have an inclination to humanities and social sciences get demotivated; seldom do they have a clarity of vision, a

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Phone: +91 – 8285325963, 8285607309  
E-mail: [thenewlearn@gmail.com](mailto:thenewlearn@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.thenewlearn.com](http://www.thenewlearn.com)

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source of encouragement to pursue their life-projects.

It is in this context that *The New Leam* has decided to come forward with this booklet. *The New Leam*—our readers know—is not just another magazine on education and culture. Its primary objective is to initiate a movement, a sensitivity, a quest for meaningful learning and education. Through our regular workshops we have engaged with many children and teachers; and we have felt that it is absolutely important to speak what ought to be spoken—no society can progress only with its engineers and corporate bosses even if the ruling establishment feels happy with the mathematics of sensex and ‘growth rate’, life exists beyond the rationale of the market even if the neo-liberal economists tell our educationists another story, and a living civilization and culture needs the cultivation of artistic sensibilities, humanistic temper and critical insight of social sciences. A society without its poets, film makers, artists, historians, philosophers, sociologists and political analysts is a decadent society. And hence it is high time we emphasized the significance of arts, humanities and social sciences in our education. And it must begin from school itself.

The present booklet has emerged out of this need. It seeks to communicate with school students who have chosen to pursue humanities and social sciences. And we believe that the booklet is equally relevant for the concerned teachers, parents and even science/commerce students who often evolve a very wrong and distorted understanding of

humanities and social sciences. We have decided to write it in a dialogic form: the student and the teacher engaging in a conversation, clearing doubts and exploring the deeper meanings of their knowledge pursuits. The dialogic form, we believe, is a pedagogic art; it breaks the monologue of an essay; it involves the reader; it begins with questions; it is transparent; and it is lively and readable.

It is a collective venture by the editorial team of *The New Leam*. It has emerged out of a series of conversations. We are grateful to the children we have worked with. Our friends and well-wishers, we believe, will come forward to spread the idea across the country. And Professor Avijit Pathak (CSSS/SSS/JNU) has encouraged us to take up this project. We express our gratitude to him. We believe that the booklet will be appreciated by its readers, and they will be its messengers.

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New Delhi

**Vikash Sharma**

Editor

*The New Leam*



Student: *I have just entered Class XI. But I am not very happy. I am confused. I have begun to lose faith in myself—my intelligence and capabilities.*

Teacher: Why is it so? You are young. You have just begun your life. For you, this is the time to learn, to explore, to find yourself. Why should you have a sense of despair?

Student: *I have opted for arts and humanities. But everybody thinks that those who are not intelligent, or can't do well in science and commerce are compelled to opt for arts. This is demoralizing. Tell me, am I a loser?*

Teacher: *Who are the people who tell you that arts and humanities do not require much talent or intelligence?*

Student: *Even our schoolteachers feel so. This the general belief—science students are intelligent; they do mathematics and physics; they can become doctors and engineers. But, for us, there seems to be no future. Moreover, our friends in science/commerce stream say that there is nothing great in all that we study—literature, history, psychology, sociology, and anyone can do it. Sometimes even our parents begin to think like this. Actually, what we are doing is not very prestigious.*

Teacher: Ok, I am ready to accept that what you are saying is the general belief. And I will explain why it is so. Now



tell me, what do you feel from the core of your heart? Don't you like what you study?

Student: *Yes, I like it. But then, it is not easy to overcome the societal perception.*

Teacher: I understand your state of mind—your dilemmas and anguish. But you need to see things clearly. That will help you to realize the worth of what you are pursuing.

Student: *I want to know from you. Please help me.*

Teacher: First, let us understand why these days there is valorization of science/ commerce; and devaluation of arts and humanities. You see, generally the average human consciousness gets carried away by the logic of immediate and concrete/tangible utility. In our times characterized by spectacular achievements in science and technology, and widespread trade and commerce (that is the way modern capitalist economy functions) certain professions—engineers, techno-managers, over-specialized scientists, doctors, economists, accountants, financial advisers—acquire special importance in the job market. We often seek to see a direct relationship between job and degree, education and market. This is the major utilitarian reason for the craze for science and commerce.

Student: *But this is important. We have to think of our careers and jobs. If for us there is no future, why should we pursue arts and humanities with zeal and confidence?*

Teacher: It is, of course, true that there are more jobs in the field of technology, trade and commerce. However,

there is no reason to think that what you are doing is meaningless.

Student: *Are you consoling me?*

Teacher: No, dear. Who am I to console you? I am here to make things clear before you so that you understand what you are doing, why you are doing, and what it implies for you. Only then can you gain the strength to believe in your path. It is in this context that there are two points that I wish to make. First, even if science and economics have more job opportunities, it does not mean that there is no job in the field of arts and humanities. From teaching to research, from media to civil society groups, from social sector to cultural production—you see people trained in sociology, history, psychology, literature, political science, creative arts are doing extremely well. You can be an academic, a researcher, a social activist in a non governmental organization. You can be a lawyer, a journalist, a professional in the development sector. And there are leading universities and institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Hyderabad Central University, Delhi University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, National Law Schools and many others that offer quite relevant courses in foundation disciplines like history, sociology, political science, anthropology, and applied courses like social work, law and governance, development studies, media studies, film making, community medicine etc. So you need not be a pessimist. There are many possibilities. Second—and this is really important, we all have to understand that no society



can function only with its engineers, accountants and scientists. Society needs good literature, creative art forms—music, painting, cinema; society needs social philosophers and political theorists; we need anthropologists, historians, sociologists for enriching the foundations of our civilization. It is like realizing once again that you cannot live by bread alone; you need music, philosophy, literature. When you pursue arts and humanities you remain immensely relevant because you are in tune with life's deeper needs.

Student: *I understand what you are saying. Life exists beyond technology, commerce and economics. However, there is a doubt that keeps haunting me. People say that science or economics requires intelligence—some sort of mathematical/analytical reasoning. But anyone can pursue humanities. Are we inherently inferior?*

Teacher: It is good that you have asked this question. I get an opportunity to clear your doubt. But before that, let me ask you a counter question: Was Newton superior to Shakespeare, or Tagore inferior to Einstein?

Student: *There is no question of superiority or inferiority. They were great in their own fields.*

Teacher: Now you have made my task easier. Writing *Geetanjali* or *Hamlet* was as significant as the discovery of the law of gravitation or the theory of relativity. Newton could not write *Hamlet*, nor could Tagore formulate the theory of relativity. They were working in different realms with different forms of intelligence and creative energy. You cannot compare and hierarchize. You have to accept

these diverse forms of articulation of human intelligence.

Student: *I am not yet convinced. Not everyone is Tagore or Newton. For ordinary mortals like us, it is thought that we cannot do mathematics; we cannot understand anything in a Physics book; whereas it is not difficult for a science student to read and understand a poem in our literature textbook, or make a comment on our Constitution which we study in our political science textbook. That's why, they taunt us: our subjects are easy, and what they are doing is difficult. What do you say about this?*

Teacher: I want you to see beyond these notions of 'simple' and 'difficult'. The domain of arts and humanities is the shared domain of social practices, cultural symbols and human subjectivities. It doesn't exclude. For instance, you need not be a film maker to celebrate the cinema of Satyajit Ray or Charlie Chaplin; you need not be a novelist to initiate a discussion on Premchand's literary

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creations, or for that matter, you need not be a political philosopher to look at the Indian Constitution. But that does not mean that everyone can be a film maker or a novelist or a political philosopher. The fact is that science is communicated in a highly specialized/technical language; but even the most jargonized discourse of social sciences and humanities carries the fragrance of lived experience. Take yet another illustration. William Blake wrote: *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/ And eternity in an hour*. Apparently, one may think that there is nothing great in it; simple words, anyone can write it. But the fact is that it is not so simple; poetry requires heightened creativity, sensitivity and intelligence; it is as challenging as building a bridge or doing a heart surgery.

Student: *I agree with what you are saying. But there is something that is not yet clear to me. We are not creators like Premchand, Satyajit Ray or William Blake; we are only studying their works. So what is great in that?*

Teacher: Good question. Let us understand formal educational practices. Gandhi made history; you read about it in your history textbook. Keats wrote a poem; you studied it in your English textbook. Freud gave a new meaning to psychotherapy; you read it in a chapter in your psychology textbook. Gandhi, Keats and Freud were immensely creative people; but, it appears, you are only acquiring information about them; and hence you feel there is nothing great in it, anyone can do it. And not everyone can solve a trigonometric equation, or comprehend a

complex theory of atomic physics. So you tend to feel that science is difficult and hence prestigious; whereas your task in arts and humanities is rather simple, and hence it is not taken seriously. I want you to question this assumption, and make you realize that what you are doing in arts and humanities—understanding a piece of literature, comprehending a historical event, or analyzing a political process—requires a cultivated mind with a fairly developed interpretative skill. Everyone cannot do science; likewise, not everyone can excel in humanities.

Student: *What you are saying sounds good. But people say that there is nothing beyond rote learning and commonsense in arts and humanities. Science or mathematics needs reasoning, analytical power, the ability to go in for abstract theorization. But what sort of skills or faculties do we need in order to do well in humanities and social sciences? Please elaborate. I want to know.*

Teacher: I love your curiosity, your eagerness to know. Let me try to answer your question. I wish to give concrete/specific examples, and refer to the kind of stuff you actually study. Imagine as a student of political science you are studying the process of the making of a nation. Your book might quote a political philosopher, and inform you that 'the nation is an imagined community'. How do you understand it? Merely as a fact to be memorized through rote learning for answering a 2-mark question? If you do so you would never be able take interest in the subject. The fact is that you have to think, stretch your imagination, and evolve your analytical skill. When you see that a



newspaper like *The Indian Express* is published from different places of the country, and from Cochin to Chandigarh people are reading the same editorial, you as a reader of the newspaper feel a sense of connectedness with those with whom you are not in direct face-to-face communication, but share with them the similar concerns; this connectedness reinforces your *Indianness* that transcends the limits of narrow physical localities, and hence the nation, unlike a family or a small village, is felt as an imagined community, and print capitalism contributes to this process. Take yet another example. See your NCERT English literature textbook. You are required to study a poem by Keats. “A thing of beauty is a joy forever”, wrote Keats. Your book introduces him as a ‘romantic’ poet. How do you feel and understand romanticism—its celebration of the abundant beauty of nature, human subjectivity, and its critique of urban/industrial/denaturalized living? Is his poem merely a rhythmic arrangement of words, or is it conveying a deeply intense engagement with nature? When you begin to feel nature, acquire the sensitivity to look at a tree, see the clouds, feel the beauty of sunrise and sunset, and realize its extraordinary grace and significance in a world that is otherwise becoming increasingly armored—polluted by its concrete skyscrapers, glass houses, vehicles, billboards, gadgets, anonymous living, you begin to rediscover Keats, and understand why a thing of beauty is a joy forever. In other words, understanding a poem demands a high degree of sensitivity, reflexivity and interpretative skill from you. It is not a question of

mechanically memorizing a couple of lines from the poem.

Student: *If it is really so interesting, why is it that the classroom remains so dull, and most of us do not have a sense of positive self-perception and confidence?*

Teacher: I understand what you are saying. There are many reasons for this. First, schools distribute students in different streams very mechanically: those with 80 percent or above are placed in science or commerce stream, and the ‘inferior’ ones are placed in arts. This is meaningless because the marks you get do not necessarily reveal your inclination, aptitude and interest. It is possible that one who has got 95 percent in maths may have tremendous interest in

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literature and creative arts; and one who hasn't got much in physics may have the real potential of becoming an innovative engineer. Schools are not just interested in knowing your inclination. No wonder, there are many who are pursuing science or arts without the right aptitude and inclination. Whereas, for some time, science students retain the illusion of superiority, schools make you think that if you pursue arts, you are naturally inferior. This is a very wrong way of beginning one's life-trajectory. You begin with a wounded consciousness and disinterestedness. Second, quite often, because of our absolute preoccupation with textbooks and examinations, we fail to evolve a reflexive/innovative pedagogy. The experience of education becomes tiring—devoid of joy and curiosity. That is why, you too have to make an effort on your own initiative. While you pursue arts and social sciences, try to see beyond textbooks and exam questions. Keep your eyes open. See the way the world around you functions—its culture, politics, religion, rituals and other practices. See good films, evolve a taste for good music and art forms. Read biographies, literature, good books. For instance, while studying a history textbook, don't forget to read a couple of chapters from Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*, or some notes from Bhagat Singh's diary. Likewise, while you open your literature textbook, it should not limit you; instead, it should inspire you to read more: great stories, fictions, diaries, letters, poems, travelogues. This will expand your horizon, sharpen your sensitivity, enhance your aptitude for higher learning. Yes, you will get good marks.

But you will learn something truly substantial, and that is what actually matters in the long run.

Student: *It is truly inspiring. Tell me something about the great works in the field. When I think of science, so many great names come to my mind—Isaac Newton, Niles Bohr, Albert Einstein. Are there people of that stature in our field? I want to know.*

Teacher: See how your mind is working. You are in a mood of exploration. Keep it alive. And yes, there were and are many great thinkers and innovators in your field. Let me help you by giving a couple of examples. See **Karl Marx**. You would see the reflections of his work in history, in political science, in sociology. He wrote many books—*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *The German Ideology*, *Capital*, and others. With a critical reading of history, philosophy and economics, he gave us a theory of historical materialism. To put it simply, it means that the way we think, act, behave—our ideas, beliefs and practices—depends to a great extent on the mode of production (what we produce and how we produce to sustain our economy, and fulfill our material needs) and our location in these production relations. For instance, the capitalist economy in our times (which means an economic system in a modern industrial society in which the bourgeoisie—those who own the industries—hire the proletariat or the working class, give them the wages for their mere survival, and generate wealth and profit for further investment) promotes the ideology of liberalism, private property, competition and meritocracy; moreover,



in the economy there are conflicting interests: those who own and dominate the production process—the owners of factories and economic corporations, capitalists, industrialists, managers—are interested in profit, even if it causes misery to those who are mere workers or wage earners. This is called class conflict which is inherent in this production process. This is the dialectical logic; it explains how society moves and progresses through this conflict. Marx hoped that because of this conflict a time would come when capitalism would be replaced by socialism (no private property; the state controls the production process, the welfare of all is the guiding principle). Now, as you would study, Marx inspired many historians to analyze the historical process through this analytical framework. You would see that many political scientists and sociologists analyze social conflict through this framework. Take yet another example—**Sigmund Freud**. You would know about him in your psychology book. He looked at the deeper structure of the human psyche, found a huge domain of the unconscious—filled with the instincts (from sexual pleasure to aggression, or *Eros* and *Thanatos*) that seek immediate gratification; but the moral practices of society impose restrictions on these instincts. This leads to a potentially conflict-ridden personality—one's ego is continually trying to negotiate with 'id' (instincts) and 'superego' (conscience, civilizational morality). At times, the ego fails to retain the balance and 'normalcy'; it causes psychic disorder or neurosis. The cause of neurosis is the repressed desire or instinct; since

civilization does not allow it to come in the conscious domain, it manifests itself through symptoms or perversions. Even in the lives of those who are 'normal'—following societal norms—the unconscious desire for the gratification of repressed instincts remains, and when we sleep and the control of the 'superego' becomes relatively weak, this unconscious/repressed desire manifests itself through dreams and their diverse symbols. Freud wrote a classic text like *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud was an extraordinarily powerful thinker; his influence could be seen even in the study of literature, art and culture. I am not saying that everyone agrees with Marx and Freud. The only point I am suggesting is that when you enter the field of social sciences and humanities, you are bound to discover such great treasures.

A computer engineer can evolve a software that might prove to be extremely beneficial to people; or when a surgeon does a complex heart surgery, and cures the patient, its impact is clear and undisputable. But when a historian writes about partition and the damage it caused to human psyche, its impact is of a different kind. You need not see it immediately. But this historical sensibility seeks to civilize us, and makes us realize the significance of non-sectarian, inclusive, humane outlook.



Student: *What you are saying is very deep and profound. But is there a practical impact of all that we study? Can we make a difference in the world—the way an engineer or a scientist or a doctor does?*

Teacher: I am happy that you have asked this question. We should not forget to explore the relationship between knowledge and its effect. You have to understand that the impact of science or technology is very concrete, and can be seen very clearly; but the impact of art and humanities is rather subtle, and need not always be seen so clearly. A computer engineer can evolve a software that might prove to be extremely beneficial to people; or when a surgeon does a complex heart surgery, and cures the patient, its impact is clear and undisputable. But when a historian writes about partition and the damage it caused to human psyche, its impact is of a different kind. You need not see it immediately. But this historical sensibility seeks to civilize us, and makes us realize the significance of non-sectarian, inclusive, humane outlook. In fact, the entire domain of arts, humanities and social sciences does try to shape our culture, our civilizational consciousness. It happens slowly. It is not so dramatic. But without it there is no future for humanity. Imagine how poorer (in terms of our culture and values) we would have been had there been no Shakespeare, no Leonardo de Vinchi, no Tagore, no book on literature, history, philosophy. If science and technology affect the material domain, arts and humanities affect the cultural/social/psychic domain; and you and I need both. When a doctor heals your body, you see your body as a

carrier of the life-energy through which you would possibly read a good poem, listen to a good song, see a good film, study a book of religion or philosophy. If there is nothing higher to pursue, what do you do with a perfectly medicated body? If no good film is produced, what do you do with the grand design of a cinema hall that the engineer builds?

Student: *I am sorry to say that not everyone would agree with you. These days everyone—politicians, economists, people in general—speaks of growth and development. Even educationists assert the importance of hard sciences, technology, economics and business studies. Under these circumstances, who bothers about culture, aesthetics and values?*

Teacher: You need not feel sorry. You must clear all your doubts. Yes, by ‘development’ or ‘growth’

What sort of ‘growth’ or ‘development’ is it? Does it help everybody? Does it further intensify social inequality? Does it cause restlessness, or peace, ethical/spiritual enrichment of human life? When you study a thinker like Mahatma Gandhi, know about environment and ecology, ask critical questions—and social sciences and humanities prepare you for all this—you do not get carried away by this propaganda of ‘development’ and ‘growth’; you begin to see the world differently; and then you contribute to the making of a better society.



we generally mean economic progress, technological advancement, accelerated industrialization and urbanization, expansion of the market, and new job opportunities. And this requires ‘skilled’ manpower—people trained in the kind of vocations that help them to work with new technologies, market strategies, economic projects and diverse service sectors. And that is why, as I have already said, you see the popularity of certain kinds of courses—say, information technology, financial management, business studies etc. But social sciences and humanities would give you yet another dimension of the reality which is tremendously important, if we want to serve our environment, create a peaceful/egalitarian society. You know that one-sided development and industrialization have caused severe damage to environment; it leads to all sorts of ‘risks’—depletion of ozone layer, emission from nuclear reactors, deforestation, massive use of pesticide leading to fatal diseases; moreover, it has displaced people from their natural surroundings, it has generated a culture of consumption causing many other pathologies: greed, jealousy, alcoholism, sexual aberrations, depression. It is always important to ask: What sort of ‘growth’ or ‘development’ is it? Does it help everybody? Does it further intensify social inequality? Does it cause restlessness, or peace, ethical/spiritual enrichment of human life? When you study a thinker like Mahatma Gandhi, know about environment and ecology, ask critical questions—and social sciences and humanities prepare you for all this—you do not get carried away by this propaganda of ‘development’

and ‘growth’; you begin to see the world differently; and then you contribute to the making of a better society. You and I have to make choices in our lives. Yes, it is easy to be part of the crowd (don’t you think that it is this crowd mentality that drives everyone pursuing science to write entrance tests for medical/engineering colleges?); but it is difficult to choose a path that is different, yet immensely meaningful.

Student: *Your convictions are pretty strong. You touch my heart. I have begun to see the flash of truth. I see the meaning in my studies. Yes, I realize that in today’s world, we have to confront many difficulties—peer pressure, parental anxiety, negative societal perception and survival issues. Nevertheless, I have begun to believe that if I respect and trust what I do, if I live with a positive self-perception, I will gain the strength to overcome all these difficulties. Thank you very much for clearing my doubts.*